DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 045 081 JC 710 009

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TITLE Self-Directed Learning at Meramec Community College.
PUB DATE Jan 71
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.60
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum, Experimental Curriculum, *Experimental Programs, *Independent Study, Individual Instruction, *Individual Study, *Junior Colleges, Learning Motivation, *Learning Processes, Learning Theories
IDENTIFIERS Missouri

ABSTRACT

During the spring 1970 semester at Meramec Community College, 29 students participated in an experimental program of supervised, self-directed learning. This program grew out of the belief that community colleges were not meeting the needs of students with widely varied backgrounds. Questionnaires were distributed to the students and instructors who took part in the program. Answers to the following questions were found: (1) Can community college students assume a major responsibility for their own learning? (2) Will efficiencies of time, space, and money be increased through self-directed learning strategies? (3) Will students learn as much when using self-directed learning techniques? (4) Do students gain self-reliance and continued interest in learning? (5) Are faculty and other staff members comfortable with self-directed learning activities? Based on the program's successful, satisfying results, it was recommended that traditional concepts of courses and instruction be questioned, and that the self-directed learning program be expanded. (CA)

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

AT

MERAMEC COMMUNITY COLLEGE

JANUARY 1971

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Introduction

Much has been written regarding the necessity for universal higher education. Indeed post high school education has become a national commitment. During the first three decades of this century colleges were required only to meet the challenge of educating a relatively small group of students -- those who could afford post high school education and those who were academically qualified for post high school education. After World War II the GI bill, the improved affluency of the American public, the growth of technology, and population mobility combined to increase awareness of educational needs and in turn changed the traditional challenge of higher education. Americans demanded and the nation accepted the concept of universal higher education.

Writing about the effect of this new demand Frank Logan, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, has stated:

> The GI Bill immediately after World War II was salutary for all colleges. Mature, well motivated veterans created a memorable period in collegiate history: they impressed faculties, raised admission standards, and sweetened institutional solvency in the process. Influenced in part by this experience, private colleges at the crossroads, particularly those of national standing, elected to raise tuition sharply, to stabilize enrollment and to raise admission standards by emphasizing measured academic ability and achievement-test scores. Taken collectively, the strategy was effective: it focused on the middle and upper middle classes, and it catered to their notions of prestige and exclusiveness; the emphasis upon proven ability was conveniently biased in favor of middle-class values and capabilities. A salable package was marketed for the rising number of affluent purchasers beginning in the mid-1950's.[1]

The best known colleges were able to accept only the most academically able leaving the residue to other segments of post high school education. College departments faced with a more heterogeneous population responded by developing more courses, many assumed to be more appropriate for students of different verbal and mathematical aptitudes, and by using some courses as hurdles to full standing in a college program. In the first case the result was proliferation of courses, dilution of department energies and increased expenses. In the second case students were frustrated and often embittered.

Fortunately the new challenge quickened the community college movement and it soon gained momentum as one rational response to the requirement of universal post high school education. Community colleges, with vigor and broad horizons, developed with ideas of comprehensiveness of programing and an open door to nearly all who would enter. But as students poured into the two-year colleges they often discovered that their real needs were frustrated both by their own concept of higher education and by the traditional concepts related to the assumed academic levels

attributed to transfer courses, non transfer courses, developmental courses, honors courses and occupational courses. The community college student is often thrown into a morass of courses with little direction and almost no experience in how to select a best individual pattern. If students selected the popular liberal arts curriculum they may be simply extending their high school education, competing with more verbal students and hardly changing their relative position with respect to the world of work. Additionally, they risked failure due to verbal demands of these courses. If they selected a career entry curriculum they may be forfeiting future opportunities to continue their education and when students are forced into developmental education they express extreme dissatisfaction of being involved in a fruitless activity which consumes their time and rarely[2] leads to success in courses at a more acceptable level. Thus, a threat hangs over the student that if his selection or guidance is wrong he may be led down a path in which he may be irreversibly hurt by his attempt.

It is becoming clear that traditional course and curricula preparation is not capable of meeting the needs of students with multitude backgrounds and experiences. Inevitably the real needs of students are sacrificed as the course builders proliferate courses, sections and curricula to meet assumed students needs. For example many colleges offer three or four different English courses for first year students -- a developmental (remedial) course for students considered as poor risks; a technical (career) course for students electing a two-year career program; a college level course for transfer students; and sometimes an honors course for selected transfer students. Yet in most cases these courses overlap with respect to learning activities and seldom are defined so that an observer could differentiate between the courses or between the expected terminal behaviors of the students. As a direct result students and teachers are seldom satisfied and the cost per student is greatly increased. Nor is traditional teaching -- lecturing, discussing, assignment completion, laboratory activity and testing -- capable of meeting the complex challenge of universal higher education. Most serious educators agree that a single lecture, a single assignment or a single test cannot be appropriate for a heterogeneous group of learners.

Modern Challenge

Since learners vary with respect to readiness to learn, specific abilities, patterns of learning, motivation, learning objectives, career selection, and so on, it follows that the challenge of universal higher education cannot be met by more courses at different levels but by more learning pathways leading to achievements, appropriate for individual learners, in fewer courses or no courses at all. In other words, college departments need to develop more learning modes, leading to individualized achievement of well defined objectives. Thus, the student can, with guidance, select objectives which are appropriate to his needs and learning modes which fit his learning style.

The modern challenge for community college teachers is to clearly define learning outcomes, to contrive learning strategies which assure individual learners of a set of appropriate learning experiences leading to achievement and to require learners to achieve at a criterion level as a basis for validating achievement. This challenge can be easily accepted today in that college libraries contain a wealth of materials capable of matching the needs of individual students; college laboratories are equipped with apparatus and materials to support a diversity of laboratory experiences; colleges are located in communities which supply a diversity of real life experiences; college faculties possess multifold talents, interests and experiences; college administrators are anxious to solve the problems of scheduling, registration; and the general public is willing to support education which really meets community needs.

Experimental Self-Directed Learning Program

During the spring 1970 semester at Meramec Community College twenty-eight students participated in an experimental program of supervised self-directed learning. This initial program was designed to answer some of the following questions:

1. Can community college sutdents assume a major responsibility for their own learning?

2. Will efficiencies of time, space and money be increased through self-directed learning strategies?

3. Will students learn as much when using self-directed learning techniques?

4. Do students gain self reliance and continued interest in learning?

5. Are faculty and other staff members comfortable with self-directed learning activities?

The program developed for experimentation envisioned that students might enter the self-directed learning program through two entrance interviews. The first interview with the program supervisor attempted to counsel the individual student as to his responsibility for self-directed learning and to estimate the student's maturity and his motivation for learning. In no case did the entrance interview result in a refusal to accept a student in the program; however, in several cases students decided not to matriculate after the program was carefully described. The second interview with the course supervisor is designed to acquaint the student with the course requirements, i.e., the course objectives, the learning activities and the evaluation procedures. If the student elects to matriculate in the course, the interview continues so as to establish a(n): (1) set of course objectives, (2) arrangement for the acquiring of learning materials, (3) arrangement for tutorial assistance if needed, (4) outline of the working sessions, (5) description projects and papers

to be completed, (6) agreement on a completion time schedule, and (7) arrangement for the evaluation of achievement. A flexible contract is now worked out and signed by the student and by the course supervisor. A copy of this contract is filed with the program supervisor, the course supervisor and the student.

Of the twenty-eight students matriculating in the self-directed learning program, at the end of the semester, twenty-one completed the program satisfactorily, five students were reported to be incomplete, and two students had withdrawn completely from the program. Of the students completing the program fifteen received a grade of A, five were awarded a grade of B, and one student received a C grade.

Questionnaires were distributed to students enrolled in the self-directed learning program and to course supervisors. The results of these questionnaires indicate that both students and teachers are satisfied with the self-directed learning program and many wish to continue as a participant in the program. Likewise, the text and library materials, the study guides and other materials appeared to be quite satisfactory.

In attempting to answer the question "Can Community College students assume responsibility for their own learning?" the response both in terms of grades and in terms of the student and supervisor appears to be a very firm yes. This response, however, is somewhat tempered when one considers that the students enrolled in the program were by and large mature, able students with credible academic backgrounds.

The question "Will efficiencies of time, space, and money be increased through self-directed learning strategies?" is more difficult to answer. In total the program involved 82 student credits attempted of which 62 student credits were completed at the end of the term. Student tuition, thus, amounted to 984 dollars of which some 980 dollars was paid out to course supervisors as consultants. Thus, the program cost was approximately 12 dollars per student credit, which is about the same as the costs for direct instruction. The use of facilities appears to be somewhat more efficient, however, in that students enrolled in self-directed learning activities used the library and the laboratories as space and time allowed. Additionally these students tended to use their homes and other facilities in the community as location for self learning.

If course grade can be used as a measure of achievement then this report will include a definite yes to the question "Will students learn as much when using self-directed learning techniques?" In fact the calculated grade point average for the twenty-one students, for which end-of-term grades are available, is 3.66 which is significantly higher than similar calculated averages for other students enrolled in college courses.

The question "Do students gain self reliance and continued interest in learning?" is difficult to answer in that the experiment did not attempt to establish a base line for either self reliance or interest in learning. However, observation of both the student and supervisor responses to the questionnaires indicate that most students were capable

of self-discipline with regard to allocating time and effort to self-directed learning. Further, most of the supervisors reported that the students' curiosity appeared to increase as a result of their experience with self-directed learning.

Faculty members and other staff members appear to accept self-directed study as one of several techniques which should be available to their students. Thus, this report can indicate a favorable response to the question "Are faculty and other staff members comfortable with self-directed learning activities?"

The experimental program has been continued during the fall 1970-71 semester. The fall experimental program was changed slightly so as to test several additional hypotheses. These are as follows:

1. That the program be opened so that students might matriculate on a continuous basis with the understanding that grade and credit will be awarded upon completion of course objectives.

2. That students may matriculate in special problems courses as well as regular college courses.

3. That the selectivity and acceptance of students in the self-directed learning program result from an interview with a specific course supervisor wherein the director of the self-directed program and/or the division chairman serves in an advisory capacity.

As of this writing fifty-three students (Appendix A) are enrolled in the self-directed learning program. Students enrolled for first semester courses are enrolled for a total of 162 credits, in 33 different courses, with 25 different course supervisors. Students paid a total tuition of $1944 and course supervisors were paid a total $2350 -- an average of $14.51 per student credit. (Appendix B)

Six college divisions enrolled students in the self-directed learning program. The number of students enrolled by divisions varied from twenty-five in the social science division to two in the communications division. Six teachers enrolled four or five students in one, two, or three courses. (Appendix C)

A New Kind of College

The continued success of the self-directed learning program and the general satisfaction expressed by both students and course supervisors leads the writer to recommend further expansion of the program through natural growth. Perhaps this natural growth will lead to a new kind of college -- a college based on a new philosophy of student learning and achievement.

Writing about the role of a faculty member in such a college -- the library college, Louis Shores states:

> In his new role the Library-College faculty member is a counselor to the individual student. He maintains daily office hours not in excess of the time required presently by combined class meetings and student appointments.....As the situation demands, there are seminar or small group meetings. Once or twice a term each faculty member presents a lecture, open to anyone in the college. The content should represent original investigation and contain information not readily available in the library material.[3]

The evidence is mounting that some of the concepts educators have accepted through the years may not be valid, for example:

1. When teachers are teaching students are learning.
2. That students entering a course are, by definition, prepared to achieve the course objectives.
3. That students must be physically present in a classroom or lecture hall to learn.
4. That all students learn via the same mode and at the same pace.
5. That more courses (course proliferation) are required to meet the needs of students.
6. That students can be evaluated and graded by comparing student test scores.

If and when some of the above concepts are seriously questioned colleges will be able to make significant gains in the efficient and effective utilization of available talents, spaces and facilities. Students would be freed to pursue learning individually via the most appropriate pathway; teachers would be freed to serve as counselors, tutors, evaluators, and co-learners; colleges would become learning centers in which its library, laboratories, classrooms, and study facilities would be fully utilized and student achievement would be awarded by accumulated credit.

The comprehensive community college is committed..."to the policy of providing for all the people a post-high school education which will meet their needs, abilities and desire to achieve."[4] Thus, our commitment is to utilize our own talents, spaces and facilities so as to meet the needs of students requesting these learning opportunities. A professional staff is maintained by the college in order: (1) To make judgments and recommendations regarding the utilization of talents, spaces and facilities; and (2) To perform the tasks required by our commitment to meet student needs.

The writer is not suggesting that the classroom and lecture hall will disappear. Rather he suggests that the relationship between student learning and the total college operation may be freed so that many modes of learning are available for many different types of learners. Thus, oral instruction by the instructor may give way to guided individual learning ia reading, mediated instruction, laboratory investigation, tutorial instruction and small group learning. Increased focus on individualized learning should create a new dimension in higher education which is equal to the task of "providing for all the people a post-high school education ..."

FOOTNOTES

1. Frank A. Logan, Rethinking College Admission, Antioch Notes, April 1970, Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

2. John E. Roueche, The Open Door College: The Problem of the Low Achiever, Journal of Higher Education XXXIX (Nov.1968) 39 (8) p. 453-456.

3. Louis Shores, The Library College Faculty, Drexel Press, 1966, p. 72.

4. JCD Board Policy, August 1968, p. 27.